



EXHIBIT 6  
DATE 3/17/2011  
HB 610

Montana Tree Farm Program  
PO Box 17276  
Missoula, MT 59808

March 17, 2011

Chairman and Members  
House Appropriations Committee

**Re: HB 610, Generally revise certain fees to implement House Bill No. 2**

Dear Mr. Chairman and Committee Members,

Please accept the following comments of concern on HB 610 on behalf of the Montana members of the American Tree Farm System. Tree Farm in Montana currently has 428 members who own and sustainably manage 176,000 acres of private family forestland throughout the state. These family forestlands range in size from 10 acres to 10,000 acres in size. These lands are often family treasures passed from generation to generation.

Tree Farmers in Montana have a long history of working with the DNRC and the legislature to ensure we pay our fair share of the cost of wildland fire protection fees. The majority of our members pay the additional fire assessment fee, currently at a rate of \$43.41 per fire protection district and \$0.24/acre for parcels greater than 20 ac in size.

This fee recognizes not only the service that forest landowners get from DNRC wildfire protection, but also the work and financial contributions that Tree Farmers and private forest landowners provide in reducing wildfire hazards and providing improved access for fire suppression on these private lands. A well managed family forest is an asset to wildfire suppression and control, not a liability. It is important to recognize that all Montana citizens benefit from the work that Tree Farm members do to provide a buffer between wildlands and urban areas. During the last legislative session in 2009 we worked with the DNRC and others to cap the percent of the total budget paid through assessments at 1/3<sup>rd</sup>. This number was not arbitrarily set, but carefully negotiated as the "fair share" of the additional cost of providing wildland fire direct protection to these private lands.

Under HB 610, many of our members will be seeing more than a **65% increase** in their wildland fire protection taxes. If this increase was necessary due to increased costs of providing protection it is likely those landowners would be willing to bear the burden. Unfortunately, HB 601 simply determines we are not paying our fair share and arbitrarily charges more for the exact same level of service.

The 4.1 million acres of mostly privately owned lands that currently pay the assessment only account for about 8% of the total 50 million acre land base that receives some level of protection from DNRC. We recognize that these lands within protection districts receive a higher level of service than the remaining 92% of the acres, however that extra value has been carefully determined through discussion and negotiation between the department, landowners and elected representatives to be 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the budget,

not the currently proposed 51%. These forest landowners are already often paying **three times** for fire protection, the wildland fire protection assessment, local fire district taxes and general fund income and property taxes.

We recognize that how we fund wildland fire protection deserves careful scrutiny and creative solutions to how we develop long term solutions. This proposal short circuits the long standing cooperative relationship between the agency, legislature and landowners in dealing with this issue. **The proposal is basically unfair** and a result of short term "easy" budget manipulation and not reflective of long term planning for how we cost effectively provide services and equitably assess costs.

**We urge you to remove sections 5, 6 and 7 from HB 610.** Tree Farm members stand ready and willing to work with the agency and others, possibly through the reactivation of the interim fire committee, to develop long term funding solutions to provide wildland fire protection to the entire 50 million acres state wide in need.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and we look forward to your deliberation of this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul R. McKenzie', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Paul R. McKenzie C.F.  
Past Chair  
Montana Tree Farm Steering Committee